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The Quiet Killers

There is a grim paradox in a world agitating for outlawing nuclear weapons, by test bans, non-proliferation agreements and the like, while the United States and presumably other major powers, including the Russians and Chinese, go on developing chemical or biological warfare techniques. If one is to credit even the least hair-raising accounts of the potential devastation in poison gases, germ war or even crop destruction, there may not be much to choose between these quiet killers and a nuclear holocaust.

More important, the development of chemical and bacteriological weaponry may well become within the technical and financial reach of the smaller, less stable nations who might be the most likely to provoke wars over contested fron-

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tiers or other issues, long before they could hope to master nuclear technology.

The spotlight placed on this awful prospect, and the need, in all logic, to do something about it, is perhaps the most valuable contribution made by the 5000 scientists who petitioned President Johnson the other day to undertake a broad review of the problem. Their immediate anxiety centers on the use of antipersonal and anticrop chemical weapons in Vietnam—weapons which the United States contends are nonlethal substances, essentially no different than commonly used riot-control gases or garden-variety weed-killers. On this count, it may be difficult to accommodate the scientists; military men are hard to persuade to abandon weapons already in use. The "dangerous precedent" the scientists are worried about has, in any event, already been set.

But the petitioners are on better ground in asking for a categorical public declaration of American policy, delineating just where this country does draw the line, and making plain that there is no disposition to depart from its World War II stand against the use of lethal chemical or biological gases. Military men are only slightly less easy to restrain from the use of weapons already developed and it is not too late to consider ways to control the use of the quiet killers here and abroad. Their potential menace justifies an effort as intense as the effort to control nuclear arms.